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Spring 2015 Third Prize Essay

UNMASKED, UNTAMED, UNABASHED – ANGELA CARTER'S WRITINGS

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Fairy tales are more than just stories about dragons, knights and princesses in far-off castles. Fairy tales, from their very beginning, intend to teach as much as they entertain. Morals and societal beliefs are deep within glamorous balls and true love's kisses, changing in meaning and importance as society moves forward through time. Although principles of society are taught in all forms of literature, fairy tales are the stories heard from the beginning of life, read to young children at bedtime, allowing their imaginations to run free. Everyone can remember tales they first heard as a little child, so much so that they can still recite their plots well into adulthood. Fairy tales have become such a core part of the human experience that it's impossible to think that they can be reworked. Or can they? Angela Carter answers this question through her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, painting old female characters in a new light full of triumph and strength. Angela Carter rewrites fairy tales to bring out the innate power of the feminine, not only in her own fairy tales but also in the original works themselves, forcing her female characters and the women who read her works to claim control of their own sexuality and their feminine existence.

To understand Angela Carter as an author, her work must be looked at in greater detail. Carter was hardly content as an author to deal with the ordinary, moving instead to explore the extraordinary through magical realism and feminist theory. Carter's works, which include a versatile mix of radio plays, short stories, novels, and poetry, came at a time of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting the ideals of women of the times who wanted social and sexual freedom from the patriarchy. Carter's extensive use of imagery and dark, Gothic themes set her apart from other authors of the time period, truly characterizing her fiction as unique and provocative. In an article written by Helen Simpson, she quotes Carter, who says herself that she is drawn to "Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious," (Simpson). These themes are the main focus of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, the concept of taking these fantastical and wonderful tales and using the imagery within them to ignite the thoughts of the unconscious and inspire thinking beyond that of the everyday.

Carter's flair for the fantastical was first exercised when she was commissioned to translate Charles Perrault's 17th century fairy tales to English. Her beautiful translation was a labor of love, each word chosen deliberately to serve the purpose of conveying the morals of each story. The act of translating left such a lasting effect on the author that she began considering how she would take the same tales and make them her own. Carter then moved from the position of the translator to that of the revisionist, and *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* was born.

While Carter did an exceptional job of translating Perrault, and her work has become a well-known edition of fairy tales, it is important to note that Carter's rewriting of the fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* intend them to be stories of her own, inspired by the original tales. The morals and themes present in the original tales are taken from their original works and molded to fit Angela Carter's

vision of how the story should be. This concept is different from that of translation, which is simply conveying the same exact story almost word for word. As Hennard states, “Carter’s translations carry a straightforward message articulated in the moral, whereas her rewritings for adults destabilize authorship and open up textuality and meaning, and thus capture the hidden complexity of Perrault’s deceptively simple and pseudo-naïve contes (tales).” (30) By translating Perrault’s tales and then writing her own interpretations, Carter seeks out the hidden meanings within the stories and brings them forward for her own purposes, using her own distinct imaginative writing style to bring forth new imagery.

Dark imagery may be the style of choice for Carter, but the themes and beliefs in her works go much deeper than stylistic choices – Carter uses her writing to convey the importance of the female, bodily and spiritually. Angela Carter is a feminist author; she believes that strength of the feminine being comes from acceptance of sexuality and the strength it provides for women. Carter was writing in 1970s England, where feminism was experiencing a powerful resurgence and women everywhere were emancipating their bodies and themselves. Women in England were gaining national attention through their works dealing in history and fiction, and were making strides in the political realm, with Margaret Thatcher as the first female prime minister (Simpson). Despite these incredible strides, women like Carter, who had written seven novels prior to *The Bloody Chamber*, were still forced into the shadows, hungry for change and recognition in their everyday lives. Feminist scholars at the time revisited past works of literature and found inherent feminine themes, using the lessons of the past to teach ways of living for the future. Many had decided that the only way to gain respect in the present was to show its prevalence in the past. This task was not easy, however. According to Veronica Schanoes, a psychoanalytic feminist scholar:

They [feminist scholars] rewrote stories that had been supposed to be already universal, highlighting the ways in which those stories had not been universal, had overlooked or violently distorted women’s experiences. In doing so, they challenged the borders not only of the self, but of story itself, refiguring the relationships among traditional stories and their revisions, as well as the function of the fantastic.” (143)

Angela Carter was an incredible supporter of this idea of breaking through past literature’s borders to apply to modern times. Feminist scholars consider themes of female power and solidarity universal, and fairy tales were considered the universal form to convey these themes, due to their longevity and their prevalence in everyday culture. Carter knew when she began writing that the concept of the fairy tale would capture the imagination of readers, who would come to the work with preconceived notions of the plot and the roles of every character. Carter rewrites, according to Hennard, to “reconsider the poetics and politics of the fairy tale against the grain of preconceived ideas about the genre. In turn, she revived the fairy tale from her own perspective and in her own time as a fundamentally modern genre from which all kinds of readers can learn” (31). Carter’s intention was to convey the feminist perspective she believed so wholeheartedly in to everyday readers, in order to further the second wave of feminism she identified with so strongly.

Charles Perrault, however, is on the complete opposite end of the literary spectrum when it comes to the writing of fairy tales. His stories are filled with female characters, all deceptively depicted as smart and virtuous, characters that, as stated by Duggan, are the “champions[s] of womankind,” much like Perrault himself (211). Hennard furthers this praise of Perrault by stating that, as an author, he was surrounded by women authors and feminine influences, addressing “social and gender issues (in a veiled and subtly humorous fashion) and [debating] the role of art and literature,” (30). Perrault, however, viewed women in a negative light, as most men of the 17th century viewed them, and only saw them as good if

they were subservient to the dominant male species (Duggan, 213). Perrault's female characters are abject in the eyes of Duggan, meaning "impure, unholy, criminal, sinful, or loathesome in certain practices, objects, or individuals," simply because they are feminine, and the feminine form is abnormal and sinful in the male world (212). When taking this into account, the female characters in Perrault's fairy tales suddenly become victims, fearful, timid creatures who deserve their punishments in the end of the tale for their sin of being female.

Perrault's interpretation of women is one that is seen across the literary genre of the fairy tale. The female personality and the female place in society is defined entirely by the male in the world of fairy tales, and there is little to no room to interpret these characters in their own stories beyond their subservient role to men. Even if a female character finds a chance to escape, such as in the original fairy tale *La Barbe Bleue* where the young wife disobeys her rich, noble husband and enters his forbidden chamber, "female desire is put into check by a male...that manages to purify, tame, and subdue female characters, or completely expel them from the body politic," (Duggan, 224). Women were forced to feel shame for the sheer fact they were women, that they possessed female bodies that were so radically different from the perfect form of the male. Perrault and other fairy tale authors of the 17th century believed that their female characters were meant to teach lessons against natural female curiosity and behavior – in essence, to show society what not to do. Perrault's "female characters are 'abject' precisely because they threaten male identity and hegemony, and they must be rejected or repelled then subdued before being reintegrated into the body politic as passive (reproductive) vessels in order to neutralize the threat they represent," meaning womanhood in itself is a threat and must be made subservient to male ideals in order to exist at all (Duggan, 224). Perrault's treatment of female characters, although shocking and misogynistic, was unfortunately the norm in society of the time, and his writings – as most literary works tend to do – reflected the patriarchal belief system of the time period.

Angela Carter saw the blatant abjection of women in Perrault's tales not as an end-all condemnation of the female form, but as an opportunity to convey her ideas by turning preconceived notions of female existence on their heads. In all of Carter's rewritten tales, the heroine experiences some sort of trauma – in *The Bloody Chamber*, it is the objectification and rape by the nameless protagonist's husband and in *The Company of Wolves*, it is the grandmother's death by a wolf eating her and the effect it thus has on Little Red Riding Hood – only to come out of their horrid experience stronger and more connected with their femininity than they were before. Society is pitted against these women, but instead of backing down, "they refuse to internalize negative evaluations imposed by a hostile judge and, rejecting mortification or self-punishment, turn the incriminating regard back toward its source in critical indictment of the (real or imagined) contemptuous other," (Johnson, 50). Carter puts her heroines in a position of shame, much like society does to all females, and forces them to use their feminine strength to become shameless, to use their self-esteem that comes from being a woman to their advantage and assert their autonomy in life. Angela Carter aims to untame her protagonists. These feminine characters take charge of their own experiences, showing that their womanhood is their most important defining feature instead of a source of shame.

Carter's use of these strong characters, especially in fairy tales, might not make sense to the readers as a form of moral encouragement for women, but its intention is to actually teach women by example. Since Carter was writing during the second wave of the feminist movement, she wanted to create characters that all women could relate to. Readers are able to actively respond to her text, "to construct [their] own fiction for herself from the elements of [her] fictions," and to take the morals and values they've learned throughout their own lives, much like the original fairy tales they read as children. These stories call for their readers to be active, much like the heroines within the pages. Carter says of her own work, "I am

all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode,” (Hennard, 2), perfectly summing up the reading experiences of her own work. Carter took new wine, the feminine ideals that she holds close of women being in charge of their sexuality, and put them into old bottles, the framework of a fairy tale that has been around for ages. These stories were inside the old molds of the fairy tale all along, and when Carter adds the new concepts that feminists held so closely, it creates a dynamic, powerful message of female power that the reader has no choice but to understand. The reader can look at the text anew, forgetting every expectation and belief they had about fairy tales and find that Carter’s deep, complex messages about feminine strength and sexuality were in place in these tales all along.

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Carter’s writing is best understood, however, by looking deeply into her works in comparison to their original tales. The titular short story of her collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, is based on Charles Perrault’s *La Barbe Bleue*, features a narcissistic seventeen-year-old bride taken into the adult world of sexual power struggle by her domineering, abusive Marquis husband. The young bride, forced to her shame on her marriage bed, continues her disgraceful journey as she disobeys her husband and discovers his dead wives in his secret chamber, ready to die for her transgressions only to be saved by her mother’s sudden arrival. Carter uses Perrault’s original story to “[emancipate] women’s bodies from attributions of cultural shame, empowering women characters with independence and agency, and bitterly denouncing the arrogant cruelty of human predators,” (Johnson, 48). She presents the audience with an innocent, almost helpless narrator, so blinded by love and the want of material objects, that the reader has conflicting opinions about her. The initial impression is one of annoyance, as the narrator brags about her husband and the numerous gifts he lavishes upon her, beautifully detailed through Carter’s writing (Carter, 3-6). The language used in the story is ornate and dense, transporting the reader into the lush world of the sadistic Marquis and his curious bride. Its meant not to confuse but to invite the reader, bringing them into the world of the nameless Marquise so they feel every emotion as she feels, the shame of the loss of her virginity to the horror of discovering the chamber to the triumph of being reunited with her mother so close to death. Carter uses this inclusive technique to put the reader in the place of the narrator, having them experience her views on feminism first hand.

The Bloody Chamber’s writing brings the reader in to see the power struggle between the feminine and the masculine, beginning in favor of the twisted Marquis. The young Marquise is submissive to her much-older husband, accepting his gifts and blindly following him to his isolated castle. The Marquise is characterized immediately as naïve and innocent – “I was seventeen and knew nothing of the world,” she says herself – to give the reader an underwhelming view of her as a person, only to be shocked at the end when she wins the fight against her controlling husband (Carter, 4). Despite her naiveté, the young girl soon realizes who she is dealing with while perusing her husband’s library, only to find violent, pornographic works. She is then subject to a violent consummation of marriage, described by Carter as “a dozen husbands impall[ing] a dozen brides,” to show truly how weak she is in the hands of her sadistic husband (Carter, 15). However, the young Marquise is not entirely innocent – she is actually in touch with her sexuality, described by Johnson as being “tantalized by the implicit arousal of her burgeoning sexual power, ‘aghast to feel [her] self stirring’ with the thrill of lascivious desire,” (50). Thus, the power struggle includes a facet of female sexuality, as the Marquise fights against her desires and allows her husband to sexually control her. Carter

sets up a tale that could very easily end in the defeat of the female's sexual freedom and understanding, but she "refuses to offer a schematic, monologic tale of male lechery and female victimization, as the ingénue feels thrilled by the exhilaration of libidinous exchange," (Johnson, 50).

Carter highlights her belief in acceptance of the feminine form and feminine sexuality through the narrator's – and her mother's – final stand against her husband. The Marquise begins her rebellion against the patriarchy when she deliberately disobeys her husband and enters his forbidden chamber while he is away, only to be presented with the horrors of his preserved dead wives (Carter, 29-30). However, upon discovering the dead bodies of the women that held the wifely title of Marquise before her, the young girl realizes that she was "one of them" and would be killed by her husband (Carter, 30). At this point in the story, it seems as if the narrator has accepted defeat with her sexual responsibility and her autonomy – she cannot win the power struggle that consumes her relationship with the Marquis. She continues to blindly accept his demands, barely putting up a fight when the Marquis explains how he will kill her by decapitation, perpetuating the male dominance in the sexual power struggle so representative of their relationship (Carter, 39). The young Marquise, however, is able to finally regain the power of the female form – her husband cuts her dress from her body mere moments before her mother bursts into the castle to save her (Carter, 42). Carter finally allows her young protagonist to gain control of her own sexuality, shown literally through the young woman's naked form as she accepts what will happen to her. The narrator is also able to accept and understand the strength of the female itself, however, when her mother shoots her husband-turned-murderer, using her "dead husband's firearm in a paradoxical assertion of androgynous female triumph," (Johnson, 52). To conclude, the narrator understands the importance of her strength as a female, whether it is through the acceptance of her sexuality in a blind lover that cannot see her physically but emotionally, or through the respect and gratitude she feels toward her mother, a figure showing solidarity with her daughter as well as other females through maternal instinct. Carter allows both central women in the story to win the power struggle against men together by showing the audience that solidarity and acceptance of sexuality are two important aspects of the feminine existence.

Carter uses *The Bloody Chamber* to present the power struggle and eventual triumph of the feminine, but she uses *The Company of Wolves* in a very different way – the story presents its female protagonist as a strong, independent character from the start. The longest of Carter's three wolf tales, *The Company of Wolves* begins with a series of anecdotal tales about werewolves and the terror they are capable of inflicting on humankind – even their howls are horrifying, described as "the sound of the rending you will suffer, in itself a murdering," (Carter, 141). Carter presents the wolves as a threat – a very definite *masculine* threat. Reminiscent of the power struggle between men and women in *The Bloody Chamber*, the wolves in this story represent domineering strength over the feminine. They have a power over every other character in the story, an imminent threat to everyone that crosses their path. Carter presents them in the same hostile fashion that men appear when they shame the female form. Red Riding Hood, on the other hand, is presented very differently from the protagonist in *The Bloody Chamber* – she is young, free, and well aware of her sexuality. According to Carter, the girl is virginal, but not submissive –

“...she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month...she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane...she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing,” (Carter, 146).

Red Riding Hood's initial description is one of strength. She is just becoming a woman, yet she is comfortable in that sexuality and will use it to her advantage. Carter distinguishes the character not only

from her other characters, who experience shame in order to find their innate sexuality and to accept their feminine form, but from the original Little Red Riding Hood, which features the young protagonist being deceived and eaten by the wolf figure. The original tale teaches young girls to not so easily follow strangers, following the belief that women inherently victimize themselves purely because they are women. However, in true Angela Carter fashion, the author takes the moral and turns it on its head, teaching her readers instead to have no fear of female sexuality and to embrace the power of women. Little Red Riding Hood as a character is the epitome of a daring girl-turned-woman – she is “fearless in pubescent pride...wrapped in the cloak of a protective hymeneal membrane that gives her a narcissistic conviction of virginal invincibility,” (Johnson, 56). She knows that she is just becoming a woman, and that her sexuality will give her power in the world, particularly the world of the tale that is dominated by the male power of the wolf. She is different than the other women in the tale, like her grandmother, who has lived her life and ends it by submitting, in a sexual manner, to the power of the wolf, seeing the “young man, eyes like cinders, naked as stone, approaching her bed,” (Carter, 149). Little Red Riding Hood is so new in her sexuality, which works to her advantage in the fact that she has no fear of what is around her. She has not lived her life and not had the experiences had by her elders, and therefore has no fear. Although that bravery can be attributed to innocence, Carter instead chooses to present it as a characteristic indicative of a strong female character, and uses it to show her audience how to take responsibility for that female strength.

Little Red Riding Hood is the winner of the power struggle from the beginning, showing the audience that she is truly “nobody’s meat,” (Carter, 151). Being aware of her sexuality goes beyond knowledge of her own body – Little Red Riding Hood is aware of the feminine influence she has over others, including the wolf. She goes through the same exchange that the original Little Red Riding Hood has with the wolf – “quote here about what big body part” but it is clear that the conversation takes a more sexualized turn. Little Red Riding Hood is not interested in submitting to the power of the wolf – she knows from the minute she comes across him that she desires him, and she will use her abilities to get him. There is no fight on Little Red Riding Hood’s part; rather, she takes control by throwing her own clothing into the fire, seducing him with her own body into the animal form she so desires (Carter, 150-151). The young girl wins the struggle, shown in the end to be sound asleep “in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf,” (Carter, 152). Little Red Riding Hood is in control of her enemy as well as herself, using her sexuality to show that “her corporeal self is not a helpless embodiment of female abjection,” Instead, “this brash adolescent connives with her lupine or lycanthropic suitor in a bold alliance of psychological equals. Offering her pubescent body, without shame, to an unorthodox savage mate in a tender conjugal embrace, she tames, humanizes, and domesticates the predator,” (Johnson, 56). Carter strategically turns the predator, a male figure presented as a powerful threat, into the prey, lured into seduction instead of murder by the capable Little Red Riding Hood. Carter’s belief that sexual responsibility is necessary for the female form to be equal, and her reimagining of Little Red Riding Hood captures this ideology perfectly.

From sadistic Marquises to dangerous wolves, Angela Carter’s fairy tales feature characters that are far from ordinary. Her works go beyond the typical damsels in distress being rescued from their towers – instead, Carter’s heroines rescue themselves, fearlessly facing the evils of patriarchy, asserting their feminine power, and taking responsibility of their sexuality and female form. These women explode the perfect ideal society holds of how a woman is supposed to act, mirroring how Angela Carter’s short stories explode the mold of the typical fairy tale. Her work presents a new type of woman, one who society can look up to for her strength and power. A “happy ever after” indeed.

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